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## Necessity and Rational Insight: BonJour and Audi on A Priori Justification

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## NECESSITY AND RATIONAL INSIGHT: BONJOUR AND AUDI ON A PRIORI JUSTIFICATION

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines a point of difference between the otherwise very similar rational epistemologies recently put forth by Laurence BonJour and Robert Audi. As internalists about a priori justification, BonJour and Audi agree that for one to be a priori justified in believing a proposition, one must be able to see that the proposition is true, or likely to be true. BonJour claims, more specifically, that one must have rational insight into the *necessity* of the proposition. Audi, on the other hand, denies this claim. While there are certain instances of a priori justification that might initially seem to support Audi's view, I argue that in fact they do not, and that BonJour's view is therefore preferable. Ultimately at stake is a question about the basic requirements of a priori justification.

**I**n the past few decades, rationalist conceptions of a priori justification have generally been left for dead by philosophers. Very recently, however, two prominent American epistemologists have sought to resuscitate such views by offering fresh and rigorous articulations of the claim that certain non-tautological, non-definitional propositions can be known or justifiably believed on the basis of pure reason. While there is much in common between the rationalist views of Laurence BonJour and Robert Audi, I want to focus here on a notable point of difference.

BonJour and Audi are both epistemological internalists, and as such they hold that to be epistemically justified in believing a given proposition, one must have good reason to think that the proposition is true.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, they agree that in the case of a priori justification of necessary propositions, the ultimate source of such reasons is an intuitive awareness of the truth of

the necessary proposition in question. That is, they agree that to be a priori justified in believing a given necessary proposition, one must have an intuitive or rational awareness of the truth of that proposition.<sup>2</sup> They disagree, however, over whether this awareness must involve a grasp of the proposition's *necessity*. This is the issue I will be concerned with in the present paper. Ultimately at stake is a question about what is essential to a priori justification: is it reasonable to think that one might be a priori justified in believing a given necessary proposition without in some sense having an awareness of the necessity of that proposition?<sup>3</sup> I shall argue that it is not.

I begin with a brief characterization of certain features of Bonjour's conception of a priori justification as developed in his *In Defense of Pure Reason*.<sup>4</sup> Bonjour insists that it is essential to a priori justification that one have rational insight into the necessity of the proposition in question. I then briefly characterize Audi's conception of a priori justification as it appears in his recent paper, "Self-Evidence."<sup>5</sup> Audi thinks that at least in certain cases one might understand a necessary proposition in a manner sufficient for a priori justification but not sufficient for revealing that proposition's *necessity*. In the remainder of the paper, I explore this suggestion and argue ultimately that we do not have good reason to accept it. My hope is that this discussion will provide a more refined understanding of the ultimate basis of a rationalist conception of a priori justification.

## I

On Bonjour's view, one is justified a priori in believing a given necessary proposition just in case one has rational insight into the *necessity* of that proposition. For instance, I am justified in believing that, say, two plus three equals five because on reflection I can simply see (in the same sense I can "see" that the conclusion of a valid argument follows from its premises) that when any two items are added to any other three items, the resulting number of items *must* be, or *necessarily* is, five. Bonjour adds, however, that in certain cases (e.g., where one lacks a refined conception of necessity) one's grasp of necessity is likely to be merely *implicit*.<sup>6</sup> His conception of a priori justification may thus be summarized as follows: one is justified a priori in believing some necessary proposition *p* just in case one has at least an implicit grasp of the necessity of *p*.

If one is not in principle uncomfortable with the notion of rational insight,<sup>7</sup> this way of thinking about the basis of a priori justification is intuitively quite plausible: what justifies our belief in a priori propositions is that we can apparently see (at least implicitly) of these propositions that they *must* be true. As Bonjour explains:

When I see or grasp or apprehend the necessary truth of the claim, for example, that nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time, I am seemingly apprehending the way that reality *must* be in this

respect, as contrasted with other ways that it could not be. If taken at face value, as the rationalist claims that in general it should be, such a rational or *a priori* insight seems to provide an entirely adequate epistemic justification for believing or accepting the proposition in question. What, after all, could be a better reason for thinking that a particular proposition is true than that one sees clearly and after careful reflection that it reflects a necessary feature that reality could not fail to possess?<sup>8</sup>

As even Audi recognizes, this is how *a priori* justification and an awareness of necessity have traditionally been related (211). And if this way of thinking about the matter is correct, then *a priori* justification will require, for an appropriate epistemological grounding, (at least implicit) insight into the necessary character of the proposition in question.

Audi's conception of *a priori* justification is derivative from his closely related conception of self-evidence. Audi says that a proposition is self-evident "provided an adequate understanding of it is sufficient for being justified in believing it and for knowing it if one believes it on the basis of that understanding" (206). An *a priori* proposition is one that is self-evident in just this sense (221). Thus on Audi's view: one is justified *a priori* in believing *p* just in case one's having an adequate understanding of *p* gives one good reason to think that *p* is *true* (205–206, 221).<sup>9</sup> While Audi does not offer a detailed positive characterization of the notion of an "adequate understanding," he does say that it "implies not only seeing what the relevant proposition says but also being able to apply it to (and withhold its application from) an appropriately wide range of cases, and being able to see some of its logical implications, to distinguish it from a certain range of close relatives, and to comprehend its elements and some of their relations" (208).

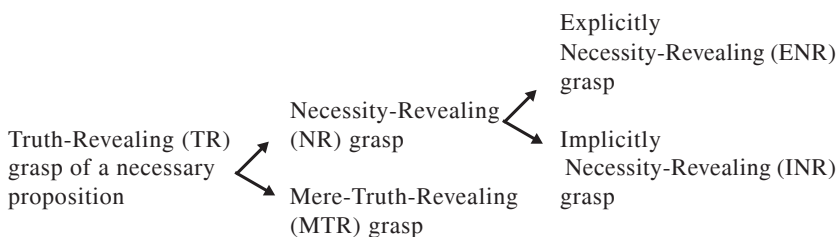
The important thing to notice about Audi's conception of *a priori* justification vis-à-vis BonJour's is that it leaves unspecified exactly how—or in virtue of *what*—an "adequate understanding" of a proposition is supposed to *justify* one's believing that proposition. Audi says that an adequate understanding will provide one with good reason for thinking that the proposition in question is true, but he fails to explain how, or in what sense, this is so. What is it about an adequate understanding of a necessary proposition that gives one a reason to think that the proposition is true? BonJour, by contrast, has a ready answer to this question. As we saw above, he holds that when one has an adequate understanding of a necessary proposition, one will have rational insight into the necessity of the proposition, which in turn will provide one with good reason for thinking that the proposition is true.

While Audi might accept the details of BonJour's account as it applies to many, or even most, cases of *a priori* justification, he apparently would deny that it applies to all cases. For he denies any necessary link between *a priori* justification and an awareness of necessity. He wants, at least in principle, to allow that one might be justified *a priori* in believing a necessary proposition

without any awareness of the necessity of that proposition (211–212). The problem, however, is that he does not provide an account of what specifically might ground justification in those cases.

Given his commitment to internalism, Audi presumably would respond by claiming that in cases of this sort, while an adequate understanding of the necessary proposition in question might not involve an awareness of its necessity, it will involve an awareness of its *truth*.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Audi might say that to be justified a priori in believing a necessary proposition, one must have an understanding of that proposition such that one is able to see that it is true; and while this *may* include an awareness of the fact that the proposition is *necessarily* true, at least in certain cases it need not.

We may conclude that BonJour and Audi agree that a priori justification is grounded in rational insight. That is, they think it is based ultimately upon a grasp or understanding of a necessary proposition in which the *truth* of the proposition is made apparent. Call this a “truth-revealing” (TR) grasp of a necessary proposition. They disagree, however, about the precise character of this state. According to BonJour, a priori justification requires not simply a TR grasp of the proposition in question, but more specifically a “necessity-revealing” (NR) grasp of that proposition. To be even more precise, since BonJour thinks that the necessity of a proposition can be grasped either implicitly or explicitly, his view is that a priori justification requires either an “implicitly necessity-revealing” (INR) grasp or an “explicitly necessity-revealing” (ENR) grasp of the relevant proposition. Audi agrees with BonJour that a priori justification requires a TR grasp of a necessary proposition. However, he denies that this grasp must involve an awareness (explicit or not) of the proposition’s necessity. Thus he thinks that at least in certain cases a priori justification can be grounded in what might be called a “mere-truth-revealing” (MTR) grasp of a necessary proposition. This provides us with the following set of distinctions:



## II

The main question at issue concerns the plausibility of Audi's suggestion that at least in certain cases a priori justification might be grounded in an MTR grasp of a necessary proposition. It was indicated earlier that this represents a departure from the traditional understanding of the relationship between a priori justification and an awareness of necessity. So we need to consider what reasons Audi might have for rejecting this view.

The most promising line of defense seems to be with certain putative instances of a priori justification where the person in question apparently lacks, or else fails to apply, anything like a robust concept of necessity. It does not seem implausible to think, for example, that relatively young children who apparently lack the concept of necessity might nevertheless come to see in a purely rational way the truth of certain basic mathematical and logical propositions (e.g., that if something is red all over then it cannot be green all over at the same time). These are cases where a priori justification appears to be grounded in an MTR grasp of a necessary proposition.

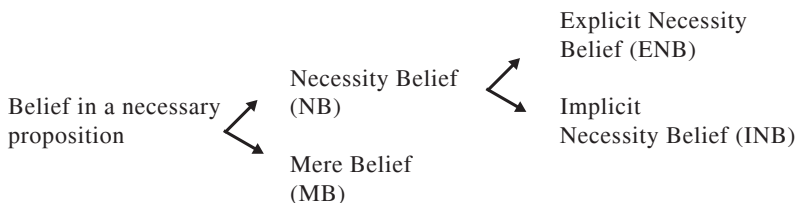
But one likely objection is that beliefs of this sort are not really justified. Recall that both Audi and Bonjour are internalists about a priori justification: they hold that to be justified a priori in believing a necessary proposition, one must have good reason for thinking that the proposition is true. But how could an MTR grasp of a necessary proposition give one good reason to think that something is *necessarily* the case? It seems, from an internalist standpoint, that if one is to justifiably believe that something is necessarily the case, then one's evidence or grounds for this belief must be adequate to show that something *is* (or is likely to be) *necessarily* the case. And since for a priori justification the grounds or evidence in question consist in an insight into the truth of a necessary proposition, this insight would apparently need to include at least some awareness of the proposition's necessity. Otherwise, it is unclear how that insight could justify the belief that something is *necessarily* so.

In response to this objection, a proponent of Audi's view is likely to claim that we sometimes believe necessary propositions without believing them *as such*. That is, for certain necessary propositions *p*, we sometimes believe *that p* without believing that *necessarily p*. And in these cases, since one merely believes that *p*, all that is apparently required for justification is that one have an awareness of the truth of *p*, which is precisely what an MTR grasp of *p* provides. Take, for instance, a certain cognitively unsophisticated or impaired individual who lacks a robust concept of necessity but who nevertheless believes on rational grounds that if *A* is taller than *B*, and *B* is taller than *C*, then *A* is taller than *C*. In this case, the relevant proposition is necessary and yet, because he does not have the concept of necessity, the individual in question does not believe that *necessarily* if *A* is taller than *B*, and *B* is taller than *C*, then *A* is taller than *C*. He simply believes that *in fact* this is so.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it seems that all that is required for the justification of this person's belief is that he be aware of

the *truth* (and not the *necessary truth*) of the relevant proposition. And he can achieve this simply by virtue of having an MTR grasp of that proposition. This suggests that in fact one can be a priori justified in believing certain necessary propositions purely on the basis of an MTR grasp of those propositions.

But an important line of objection remains open. One might question whether it is really plausible to characterize the cognitive state of the person just described as merely a belief *that p*. In other words, does the person believe that in some *contingent* sense if *A* is taller than *B*, and *B* is taller than *C*, then *A* is taller than *C*? Or instead does he in some sense *implicitly* believe that this is *necessarily* the case? This is an important question because if cases like this are best understood as involving an *implicit belief* in the necessity of the proposition in question, then in keeping with the internalist principle mentioned above, it seems that such cases would require at least an *implicit grasp* of the necessity of that proposition.<sup>12</sup> And in that case, an MTR grasp of the proposition would fail to provide an adequate basis for a priori justification.

The forgoing dialectic presents us with the question of how best to characterize doxastic states of the sort we have been considering. Before answering this question, it will prove useful to have before us another set of distinctions structurally parallel to the set laid out above. Let us call a belief in a necessary proposition that involves belief in the necessity of that proposition (e.g., a belief that *necessarily p*) a “necessity belief” (NB). Since belief in the necessity of a proposition can apparently be either implicit or explicit, let us also distinguish between two kinds of NB: an “implicit necessity belief” (INB) and an “explicit necessity belief” (ENB). Finally, we can call a belief in a necessary proposition that does not involve any belief in the necessity of that proposition a “mere belief” (MB). This yields the following set of distinctions:



### III

We must now attempt to get clear on the precise nature of the kind of doxastic state identified above. These are cases in which one (i) justifiably believes some necessary proposition *p* on a priori grounds, but (ii) owing to a lack of or a failure to apply a robust concept of necessity, does not believe that *necessarily p*; and where (iii) it is unclear whether one’s cognitive state nevertheless involves an *implicit* belief/awareness of *p*’s necessity. More

specifically, the question is whether cases of this sort are best characterized as involving an MB that  $p$  justified on the basis of an MTR grasp of  $p$ , or instead whether they involve an INB that  $p$  justified on the basis of an INR grasp of  $p$ . If the former turns out to be the better characterization, this will apparently vindicate Audi's view: it will provide us with at least some reason to think that one might be justified a priori in believing a necessary proposition on the basis of an MTR grasp of that proposition.

We can attempt to clarify the character of these cases, first, by considering how best to describe the relevant kind of doxastic state, and second, by asking whether this characterization is best understood as involving an implicit belief/awareness of the necessity of the relevant proposition. Returning to the previous example, let  $S$  be the cognitively unsophisticated or impaired individual, and  $p$  the necessary proposition that if  $A$  is taller than  $B$ , and  $B$  is taller than  $C$ , then  $A$  is taller than  $C$ . How should we characterize  $S$ 's doxastic state? Since  $S$  lacks the concept of necessity,  $S$  does not have an ENR grasp of  $p$ . That is,  $S$  does not see that *necessarily*  $p$ . Thus, since ex hypothesi  $S$  is justified in believing  $p$ , neither does  $S$  have an ENB that  $p$ , or an explicit belief in the necessity of  $p$ . However,  $S$ 's being justified requires that  $S$  in some sense see that  $p$  is true. So  $S$ 's cognitive state is such that  $S$  sees that  $p$  is true but fails to see that  $p$  is necessarily true. What further characterization might be offered of  $S$ 's cognitive state? The relevant possibilities appear to be as follows:

- (i)  $S$  sees that  $p$  is true, but also that  $p$  is false or likely to be false in some other world. And  $S$  believes accordingly.<sup>13</sup>
- (ii)  $S$  sees that  $p$  is true, but in a way that is relevant only to  $p$ 's status in this world. That is,  $S$ 's grasp of  $p$  is such that  $p$  appears true only for this world. And  $S$  believes accordingly.
- (iii)  $S$  sees that  $p$  is true, but in a way that has no direct relation to  $p$ 's status in this world as opposed to any other world. That is,  $S$ 's grasp of  $p$  is such that  $p$  appears true and not just true for this world. And  $S$  believes accordingly.

It seems fairly clear that (iii) best describes what we would expect of the specific character of  $S$ 's cognitive situation. The problem with (i) is that there is apparently no reason to think that upon coming to see that  $p$  is true in this world,  $S$  might also see that  $p$  is false or likely to be false in some other world. After all,  $p$  is a necessary truth and hence is true in all possible worlds. The problem with (ii) is similar. In virtue of what might it seem to  $S$  that the necessary proposition in question is true, but in a way that is relevant only to this world?

This seems especially problematic if we accept what both Audi and Bonjour take to be the metaphysics of a priori justification. Both think it involves grasping the nature and interrelations of abstract entities existing in all possible



worlds.<sup>14</sup> If this is right, then it seems unlikely that one might arrive at *a priori* reasons in support of a necessary proposition that are somehow epistemically applicable or relevant only to a certain limited number of worlds. As Bonjour notes: “[I]f *a priori* justification cannot appeal to any causally mediated process that yields information about this world as against other possible worlds, then whatever ground an *a priori* claim possesses, since it seemingly cannot pertain specifically to this world, will therefore extend just as well to any other possible world.”<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to (i) and (ii), (iii) seems to describe quite well what we would expect of one who grasps the truth of a necessary proposition but, lacking a robust conception of necessity, does not grasp it as such. While *S* does not see in any explicit sense that *p* is necessarily true, *S* nevertheless sees that *p* is true, and true in a way that is not epistemically relevant only to this world.

We must now determine how best to understand (iii). Does it seem to involve an MB that *p* based on an MTR grasp of *p*? Or does it instead seem better understood as involving an INB that *p* based on an INR grasp of *p*? Consider the former cognitive state. Given that an MTR grasp of a necessary proposition is one in which one sees that the proposition is true but has no hint at all of its necessity, it seems reasonable to suppose that in this case *S* sees *p* as contingent in some sense. Thus, it might seem to *S* that *p* is true in this world, but false or likely to be false in some other world, or just that *p* is true only in this world. However, this is precisely how *S*’s cognitive state was described by (i) and (ii) above. And since (i) and (ii) were inadequate characterizations of *S*’s cognitive state, we should also deny that *S* has an MTR grasp of *p*, and hence also that *S* has an MB that *p*.

But is it plausible to suppose that (iii) involves an INR grasp of *p*? Recall that with an INR grasp of a necessary proposition, while one lacks an explicit grasp of the necessity of that proposition, one sees that it is true, and also in some implicit way that it is necessarily true. The question, then, is how to characterize this “implicit” grasp of a proposition’s necessity. This is something that (iii) seems to do quite well. According to (iii), *S* sees that *p* is true, and while *S* does not explicitly see that *p* is necessarily true, there is nothing about the appearance of *p* as true to suggest that *p*’s truth holds only for this or some other limited number of worlds, i.e., that *p* is contingent. This indeed seems like a very plausible way of describing what it is to grasp the necessity of a proposition in a merely *implicit* manner.<sup>16</sup>

Let us consider another case that on the surface might seem to support Audi’s view, viz., where one has the concept of necessity but fails to apply it. Suppose I am thinking for the first time, and in a quick and off-handed manner, about some necessary proposition *x*, say, that if something is red all over, then it is not green all over. Imagine that I entertain *x* with sufficient care and for a long enough time to see that *x* is *true*, but not carefully or long enough to see in a clear and straightforward way that *x must* (in all possible worlds) be true.

Call this my grasp of  $x$  at  $t$ . The alternative characterizations of this state are parallel to those of the forgoing case:

- (i') I see that  $x$  is true, but also that  $x$  is false or likely to be false in some other world. And I believe accordingly.
- (ii') I see that  $x$  is true, but in a way that is relevant only to  $x$ 's status in this world. That is, my grasp of  $x$  is such that  $x$  appears true only for this world. And I believe accordingly.
- (iii') I see that  $x$  is true, but in a way that has no direct relation to  $x$ 's status in this world as opposed to any other world. That is, my grasp of  $x$  is such that  $x$  appears true and not just true for this world. And I believe accordingly.

For reasons analogous to those given above, (iii') seems clearly to be the best characterization of my grasp of  $x$  at  $t$ . First, there is apparently no reason to accept (i'), for there is no reason to think that  $x$ , which is true in all possible worlds, would appear to me to be false in some other world. Nor is there good reason to accept (ii'), for it seems implausible to suppose that  $x$  might seem to me to be true in a way that is applicable only to this world. This leaves (iii'), which in fact does seem to capture accurately what is likely to be my cognitive state at  $t$ . It also seems right to understand (iii') as involving an implicit grasp of the necessity of  $x$ . Again,  $x$  appears to me to be true, and while it does not appear to be true necessarily, nor does it seem in any sense to be true only for this world.

The foregoing discussion provides us with ample reason for rejecting Audi's claim that in certain cases one might be justified a priori in believing a necessary proposition without an awareness of that proposition's necessity. Thus, given the *prima facie* plausibility of the contrary view, we should concur with Bonjour that it is (at least from an internalist standpoint) an essential feature of a priori justification that it involve rational insight into the necessity of the claim in question.<sup>17</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. See Laurence Bonjour, "Externalism/Internalism," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 132–133.
2. Actually, both contend that it is necessary only that the proposition *appear* to be true. This qualification arises from their joint commitment to fallibilism about a priori justification. However, because it complicates their views in ways that are not pertinent to the present discussion, I will disregard this qualification here.
3. Both Audi and Bonjour deny that there are *contingent* a priori justifiable propositions. Thus, as the question indicates, I am concerned here only with the a priori justification of *necessary* propositions.

4. Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); hereafter *IDPR*.
5. Robert Audi, "Self-Evidence," in *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 13, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 205–28. Page references in the text will be to this source.
6. *IDPR*, 114, 127. I will say much more below about what such a grasp might involve.
7. For a defense of this notion against various epistemological and metaphysical objections, see *IDPR*, chaps. 5 and 6.
8. *IDPR*, 107.
9. Audi's derivation of this notion is somewhat more complicated than this, but its complications are not pertinent to the present discussion.
10. Indeed, Audi explicitly says that it "seems possible to see the truth of a self-evident proposition without either seeing that it is necessary or even having the concept of necessity" (211).
11. The idea is that even if a person has no concept of something's *having* to be the case in a modal sense (e.g., its being true in all possible worlds), one might still be able to see that the proposition in question *is* true. One might see that it obtains without even being conceptually capable of seeing that it *must* obtain or that *necessarily* it obtains.
12. Again, the point is that the evidence or grounds must "match" the belief in that it must provide good reason for thinking that that specific belief is true. Thus if one implicitly believes that necessarily *p*, then one must have at least an implicit awareness of the necessity of *p*.
13. As this description indicates, the doxastic state in question is one of a justified belief, and therefore includes both a belief and the grounds of the belief.
14. See "Self-Evidence," 212; *IDPR*, chap. 6.
15. *IDPR*, 12.
16. Indeed it is difficult to know what a better characterization of an INR grasp of a necessary proposition might look like. By definition it could *not* involve an *explicit* awareness of the fact that the proposition is *necessarily* true. Therefore it seems to make good sense to think of an *implicit* grasp of necessity as one in which the proposition seems clearly to be *true*, and in a way that does not seem to be epistemically specific or limited (on either positive or negative grounds) to this or any other limited number of worlds.
17. I am grateful to Laurence Bonjour for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.